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# **Taking the pain out of network induction: using INFORMS to induct new first year students**

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For several years, computing and library induction sessions for new first year students at University College Chester had involved library and computing staff talking students through procedures such as logging onto the network, setting up passwords, and how to use the library catalogue, with additional members of staff available to help individual students with problems. However, increasing student numbers and the arrival of students with vastly differing computing knowledge meant that this method was no longer appropriate. Consequently, UCC decided to examine the possibility of developing an online tutorial to students through an introduction to library and computing services.

## **Online Induction**

Induction programmes are an essential part of the process of introducing new students to higher education institutions. An induction has to include introductions to all the essential services that a student should take advantage of (or *has to take advantage of*), one of these being computing and library services. UCC has a unique intranet, developed in-house over several years. The intranet, called IBIS, is essential to the day-to-day activities of staff and students at the college and so a network induction for new undergraduates is a primary objective of the college's overall student induction procedure. In previous years large groups of students were taken into a series of IT rooms and 'lectured' to by a staff member or computer mentor about how to log on, set up passwords and use the multitude of information resources at their disposal. As groups grew larger and the strain on open-access computing

areas became acute, this became an untenable approach with occasionally dismal results.

This year (September 2003) the college was aiming to introduce nearly two thousand new students to the college network and a different approach to previous years had to be developed.

INFORMS first came to the notice of University College Chester at the JISC conference, *Creating Environments for Learning*, in December 2002 when assistant director Wendy Fiander attended a demonstration and concluded that it would be an ideal method of introducing new UCC students to library and computing services.

### **What is INFORMS?**

INFORMS is the second phase of a JISC (Joint Information Strategy Committee) funded project. The first phase (the INHALE project) aimed to develop a collection of online interactive information skills tutorials based on the Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER) for nursing and health resources. A key outcome of this phase was the creation of a model which could be used by other subjects and institutions. The INFORMS Project has built on this model and enhanced it. The project is led by the universities of Huddersfield, Loughborough, and Oxford.

Each skill tutorial is designed as a step-by-step guide to a particular electronic resource. When a tutorial is opened by a user, two separate windows appear. One is the 'Guide @ the Side' which contains several steps, each with a set of instructions or tasks. The other, main window, contains the resource in which the Guide @ the Side's instructions can be carried out. Users can work through the Guide at their own pace, leaving, coming back or even skipping steps as they see fit.

Tutorial preparation is a fairly simple process using an online tool to generate the material for the Guide @ the Side and to define the resource pages that appear in the main window. A series of forms are filled in by the designer and a very simple mark-up language is used to format and embellish the Guide material. Once a tutorial is prepared it can be placed online at Huddersfield in a prepared 'portfolio'. This portfolio can be accessed and used by any user with access to the internet and, of course, access rights to the resource. Portfolio materials can also be accessed for editing and adoption by any participating institution which, in turn, promotes resource sharing and spreads some of the workload.

### **INFORMS @ University College Chester**

As a participating institution, UCC identified a need that didn't immediately fit with the original concept for the project. We realised that the model does not just fit the skills training needs of typical information retrieval resources such as electronic databases and journals, but could be adapted to fit the needs of any online tool or resource, in this case, to introduce students to IBIS.

For the induction to IBIS a completely new unit had to be developed as obviously no previous resources existed. Most of the material in the unit was created by Colin Sinclair, UCC's learning and teaching development officer, but the selection of content was an inclusive process.

### **What to include?**

Colleagues with responsibilities in learning resources, student guidance and support, and computing services were all included in discussions to develop the outline of the content required, and in some cases also directly provided suitable material for inclusion in the final unit.

The key areas of the network induction from previous years had to be included and were carefully prioritised. In addition several stakeholders were also aiming to get their information into the induction tutorial. The final list was a compromise that incorporated as many concerns as possible while meeting the essential constraints of time and ability. The inclusions were:

- Introduction to the intranet
- Signing into the intranet
- Changing the intranet password
- Accessing e-mail
- Accessing the student progress file
- Accessing the module learning spaces
- Using the library catalogue
- Accessing other resources such as student guidance support, student timetables and the students' union.

### **How to deliver?**

The completed tutorial would take a reasonably competent user around fifteen minutes to complete. The induction schedules allowed up to thirty minutes for the network induction.

As well as having access to the INFORMS tutorial by accessing a clear link on the college intranet homepage all students would be given a workbook. This would contain the text from the tutorial with screen-captures. It would help students who were having problems using the tutorial to 'fall back' on the workbook to ensure they completed the induction and allow students to check a point at a later date. In addition, in the unlikely event of the internet connection with Huddersfield being lost or a complete failure of the network at UCC, the workbook could be taken away for students to complete the induction in their own time.

The session leader had an essential role. The first step of logging on to the network to access the tutorial had to be covered by the leader standing in front of the group and telling the students what to do and when to do it. This would be followed by a brief introduction to the tutorial to ensure that students understood how the two windows worked and what they were expected to do. The leader was supported by library staff who had received training in the tutorial and each was given a core script to help them manage the sessions, thus ensuring that students received individual attention if they needed it.

On the day the system worked very well. There were several user problems (invalid usernames or passwords for example) and a few network problems as towards mid-morning the network was in use not only by the 200 or so inductees every half hour but also by the rest of the college staff and students. Both the Chester and Huddersfield servers coped well with the usage.

**What next?**

The induction tutorial continues to be used, several months on, by students who missed induction (students who arrived at the college later and part-time students on evening courses) and by students refreshing their knowledge about some aspects of the network. This has brought an unexpected benefit in that all new students receive equal provision.

Currently, UCC is working on developing INFORMS tutorials for its electronic databases. These tutorials will be located within the VLB, both on the library pages and the appropriate module learning space in an effort to increase student use of electronic resources and hence to improve the quality of their work. Not only will these tutorials relieve pressure on staff time spent training students on use of these resources (as it did at induction) but also allow students to learn at their own speed and at any time. Several members of staff have now been trained in using INFORMS and further tutorials are currently in development.